



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 10**

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OFFICE OF
ECOSYSTEMS, TRIBAL AND
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

October 3, 2011

Dr. Andrew C. Hammond
Director USDA, ARS, Pacific West Area
800 Buchanan Street
Albany, California 94710

Re: EPA comments on Agricultural Research Service (ARS), USDA draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for U.S. Sheep Experiment Station (USSES). USEPA Region 10 Project Number: 11-006-DOA.

Dear Dr. Hammond:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the USDA DEIS regarding sheep grazing and associated activities at the USSES, Dubois, Idaho. Our review was conducted in accordance with our responsibilities under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. Section 309 specifically directs the EPA to review and comment in writing on the environmental impacts associated with all major federal actions. Under our Section 309 authority, our review of the DEIS considers the expected environmental impacts, and the adequacy of the EIS in meeting procedural and public disclosure requirements of NEPA.

The ARS is the principal in-house research agency of the USDA and implements research such as the USSES to develop and transfer solutions to agricultural problems. The Dubois research station was selected almost a century ago and the current ARS research at USSES is aimed at developing new or improving existing genetic lines of sheep (e.g., enhance production and marketable product). The span of sheep grazing allotments for the USSES includes ARS property and lands managed by BLM, USFS, and DOE lands.

The DEIS analyzes four alternatives to continue management of the USSES and one alternative to eliminate sheep grazing completely from the experimental operation. The continued management alternatives range from a continuation of historic and ongoing practices (Alternative 1), to reducing grazing in areas with key wildlife habitat (an issue raised in public comments). Alternative 1 is identified as the Preferred Alternative.

Based on our review, we have assigned a rating of EC-2 (Environmental Concerns, Insufficient Information) to the DEIS. The EPA is concerned about potential spread of disease when domestic and bighorn sheep interact. Our comments also include recommendations to clarify the purpose and need and to provide more information about potential impacts to sage grouse and water quality.

The DEIS states that two of the allotments (BLM's Bernice allotment and USFS Snakey/Kelly allotments) have the potential to negatively affect bighorn sheep herds with a moderate probability of

interaction. In 2009 bighorn sheep were listed as a sensitive species in USFS Region 4. One of the main concerns with domestic sheep grazing is the risk of interaction with bighorn sheep. From past analyses, we understand that a high probability of bighorn sheep contracting disease (namely bacterial pneumonia) occurs through contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep. The spread of these bacteria has been reported as the number one cause for bighorn sheep population declines throughout North America¹. In our scoping comments we recommended that an alternative be developed to eliminate or reduce the risk of interaction. We appreciate the inclusion of Alternative 5, which eliminates grazing in the two allotments with the greatest risk. We also appreciate the detailed discussion on management directives that reduce interaction as well (e.g., grazing at lower elevations). However, we are concerned because the agency's preferred alternative proposes to continue grazing on the allotments with greatest risk.

Recommendation:

The EPA continues to strongly encourage the ARS to consider eliminating or greatly reducing potential interaction between domestic and bighorn sheep by discontinuing grazing in allotments with high risk of interaction.

The DEIS describes the research objectives in the ARS Action Plan under the section on purpose and need. These include items such as effectively using animal genetic and genomic resources, enhancing animal adaptation, and measuring and enhancing product quality. However, the DEIS does not include information on how to determine if these objectives are being met. There appears to be no measure to determine whether or not existing management should continue (Alternative 1) or if research should be abandoned (Alternative 2). The EIS should include metrics to clarify the appropriate scale of grazing to satisfy research needs. This should also include defining how research is contributing to the ARS mission to solve "agriculture problems of high national priority..."

Recommendation:

The EPA recommends that the final EIS include a measure to determine the appropriate scale of grazing that should occur to meet the purpose and need and contribute to resolving issues related to specific agricultural problems.

The analysis includes detailed information on water quality and monitoring, and identifies streams that are listed on the State's integrated 303(d) and 305(b) report. The EIS states that the reaches of listed streams that flow through ARS allotments do not show evidence of habitat alteration, are properly functioning, and in some cases are in excellent condition. The EIS also states that some water bodies within the project boundary have not been assessed by the State of Idaho. We recommend that ARS coordinate with the state to share information about water quality conditions on allotments, fill information gaps, and develop a monitoring plan that can inform grazing management to protect or restore beneficial uses. We also encourage ARS to support Water Quality Restoration Plan development and Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) implementation consistent with the 2002 Memorandum of Understanding and the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Protocol for Addressing Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 303(d) Listed Waters.

¹ Garde, E., S. Kutz, H. Schwantje, and A. Veitch. 2005. Examining the risk of disease transmission between wild Dall's sheep and mountain goats, and introduced domestic sheep, goats and llamas in the Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territories Agricultural Policy Framework and Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories, Canada.

The ARS allotments include habitat that supports sage grouse, which is an ESA candidate species, considered imperiled by BLM, and considered a sensitive species by USFS Region 4. The management of rangelands in the USSES promotes protection of sage grouse habitat by continuing to provide key habitat for pre-nesting, breeding, nesting, and early brood-rearing. We support the importance of promoting population growth and stability and the contribution that the ARS makes to this effort. We note that fences across the landscape may cause mortality of sage grouse due to direct impact during flight or due to predation because raptors use posts for perch sites¹. The DEIS states that there are 180 miles of permanent fences in the project area. The analysis does not include information about how these fences impact sage grouse. The EIS should include a discussion of this potential hazard and provide information on measures to mitigate effects. For example, mitigation might include installing flagging on fences to increase visibility of the wires.

Recommendation:

The EPA recommends that the final EIS include information on the potential hazard of fences to sage grouse and include measures to mitigate mortality.

Finally, we would mention that the maps in the draft EIS depend on color for interpretation; however, the version sent to the EPA Region 10 was in black and white. Also, we were unable to locate the Appendices online that included Appendix A- Project Maps. Therefore, many of the figures were difficult to decipher. We request that you send a hard, color copy of the final EIS when it is ready for our review.

Thank you for the opportunity to review the USSES DEIS. If you have any questions or would like to discuss these comments, please feel free to contact me at (206) 553-1601 or by electronic mail at reichgott.christine@epa.gov, or you may contact Lynne McWhorter of my staff at (206) 553-0205 or by electronic mail at mcwhorter.lynne@epa.gov.

Sincerely,



Christine B. Reichgott, Unit Manager
Environmental Review and Sediment Management Unit

¹ Connelly, J.W., et al. 2000. Guidelines to manage sage grouse populations and their habitats. Wildlife Society Bulletin 2000, 28(4): 967-985.
CALL, M. W., AND C. MASER. 1985. Wildlife habitats in managed rangelands—the great basin of southeastern Oregon. Sage grouse. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, General Technical Report PNW-187, Portland, Oregon, USA.

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Rating System for
Draft Environmental Impact Statements
Definitions and Follow-Up Action***

Environmental Impact of the Action

LO – Lack of Objections

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) review has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes to the proposal. The review may have disclosed opportunities for application of mitigation measures that could be accomplished with no more than minor changes to the proposal.

EC – Environmental Concerns

EPA review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative or application of mitigation measures that can reduce these impacts.

EO – Environmental Objections

EPA review has identified significant environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to provide adequate protection for the environment. Corrective measures may require substantial changes to the preferred alternative or consideration of some other project alternative (including the no-action alternative or a new alternative). EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

EU – Environmentally Unsatisfactory

EPA review has identified adverse environmental impacts that are of sufficient magnitude that they are unsatisfactory from the standpoint of public health or welfare or environmental quality. EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts. If the potential unsatisfactory impacts are not corrected at the final EIS stage, this proposal will be recommended for referral to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

Adequacy of the Impact Statement

Category 1 – Adequate

EPA believes the draft EIS adequately sets forth the environmental impact(s) of the preferred alternative and those of the alternatives reasonably available to the project or action. No further analysis of data collection is necessary, but the reviewer may suggest the addition of clarifying language or information.

Category 2 – Insufficient Information

The draft EIS does not contain sufficient information for EPA to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment, or the EPA reviewer has identified new reasonably available alternatives that are within the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which could reduce the environmental impacts of the action. The identified additional information, data, analyses or discussion should be included in the final EIS.

Category 3 – Inadequate

EPA does not believe that the draft EIS adequately assesses potentially significant environmental impacts of the action, or the EPA reviewer has identified new, reasonably available alternatives that are outside of the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which should be analyzed in order to reduce the potentially significant environmental impacts. EPA believes that the identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussions are of such a magnitude that they should have full public review at a draft stage. EPA does not believe that the draft EIS is adequate for the purposes of the National Environmental Policy Act and or Section 309 review, and thus should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised draft EIS. On the basis of the potential significant impacts involved, this proposal could be a candidate for referral to the CEQ.

* From EPA Manual 1640 Policy and Procedures for the Review of Federal Actions Impacting the Environment. February, 1987.